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ABSTRACT

Programs for young children should cultivate children's real feelings, both rage and joy, and help children learn to accept and live with their feelings in non-destructive ways. Strong feelings, even negative ones, are sources of energy; rather than suppressing children's negative energy, teachers should recognize its creative aspects and use their own creativity to channel the energy in a positive direction. Managing these strong feelings by building on children's own ideas, i.e. developing an "emergent curriculum," is more appropriate and more enjoyable than relying on a planned curriculum. However, an emergent curriculum requires that teachers give up their fear of losing control and thus be able to play and laugh with children. Providing real learning environments and adapting adult behaviors so as to help children to express and acknowledge their feelings, to question, to express will, and to be distinct individuals are essential to the goal of developing members of our changing society who are not afraid of change. (Author/JA)

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LEARNING THROUGH PLAY AND LAUGHTER

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For everything there is an appointed time
And there is a time for every purpose under the heavens:
A time to be born, and a time to die,
A time for planting, and a time for uprooting,
A time to slay, and a time to heal,
A time to tear down, and a time to rebuild,
A time to weep, and a time to laugh . . .

Does this sound like the text for a sermon? I think maybe I want it to. These words from the Bible - from the Book of Ecclesiastes - are all about strong feelings. They say that there is a time for each of these feelings - for crying and laughing, for knocking down and rebuilding. I want to make a case for the presence of strong feelings in day care and other programs for young children.

I was the sort of child whom some adults regard as bratty. I said, "I want" a lot, and I meant it. My mother cared that I become moderately civilized, but she cared even more that I have a lot of my wants met. She wanted me to have a different sort of childhood than she had had. She grew up the youngest in a poor German immigrant family of eight children, and her father was tyrannical and her mother was exhausted. My mother was often ill, as a child, and then she had to take charge of the household in her early teens, because her mother was ill. As a child, she didn't experience much autonomy.

PS 01933

Speech given at conference of Wisconsin Early Childhood Association, Madison, Wisconsin, November 14, 1980.

Do you know Erik Erikson's definition of autonomy? He talks about the Will, which he says is "the unbroken determination to exercise free choice as well as self-control, in spite of early experiences of shame and self-doubt caused by uncontrolled wilfulness and rage over being controlled." (Erikson, Adulthood, 1976) In Erikson's developmental theory, autonomy is learned most crucially in the years between one and three, when the toddler is beginning to strike out on his own. His words are, "I want." "Me do it."

In my mother's family, as in a good many other families and in some schools as well, adults were interested in breaking the child's will, not in cultivating it. The Puritan tradition is very strong on breaking the will. Children, in this view, are full of evil impulses; they must be repeatedly suppressed, trained into conformity.

This tradition is no longer predominant in our culture, but I don't think it has disappeared. I have six children of my own, and I teach a primary class at Pacific Oaks, and I am frequently reminded that children are full of evil impulses - by which I mean that they want to do things I don't want them to do. Sometimes I am very firm with them, even fierce. I sat on one nine-year-old one day last year when he threatened to break my wrist and I wanted to make it clear that I was bigger than he was. Children do need adult control; they, and we, need protection from their unacceptable desires. But it's all a question of balance, and of the decisions we make about the kind of people we would like children to grow up to be.

The child whose will is broken will grow up to be docile, obedient, conforming. It is possible that suppressed rage will burst out at some point in his life, directed against himself or against others; but mostly the socialization process works. He will do his job even if it's boring; he will come to work on time; he will obey the laws; he will support the status quo. He is likely to be anxious if things change, and fearful of people who are different from himself.

In an industrial society, this sort of person has often been seen as most desirable; he's one of the parts that makes the system run smoothly. My own belief, however, is that our changing society needs many members who are quite different - people who ask questions, who aren't afraid of change, who are imaginative in inventing changes. You may or may not share my view. If you don't, you will probably want to argue or daydream your way through the rest of what I have to say. Because what I'm going to talk about are the kinds of learning environments and the kinds of adult behavior which help children to express and acknowledge their feelings, to question, to express their will, to be distinct and sometimes prickly individuals.

There is a time to cry, and a time to laugh, and willful individuals are good at doing both. Both rage and joy are sources of energy. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, the New Zealand teacher whose work some of you may know, speaks of the energy within the child as a volcano. The volcano, she says, has both creative and destructive vents. The energy can come out in aggression and anger and disruptive behavior, or it can be chan-

neled into creative language and body movement and block building and painting and laughter. But the child has to do something with it, not just try to bottle it up. One of my child development students recently wrote that in her family strong feelings were not permitted - and by the time she was in third grade she had an ulcer. There was that energy, eating at her from inside. The body has its own wisdom.

I have seen many teachers - I do it myself from time to time - desperately trying to suppress that energy of children. And I mean desperate. We're scared to death that those little children will get beyond our control, will create chaos, will destroy our carefully achieved order. Some of us, including me, yell. (As a parent of young children I even threw things.) Others get frighteningly quiet - and obviously furious. We match our destructive energy against the children's - and because we're bigger and meaner, we usually win. Though some of us feel we're losing for a long time. My co-teacher says that when she first started teaching she used to go home every evening and drink whisky and cry. She is now a superb teacher - but occasionally she still goes home and cries because she wants it to be perfect, and it isn't. We have a great class, but some days are still awful.

Just to fill you in: I was trained, here in Madison, as a preschool teacher. That's what I really know how to do. I taught young children, and then I taught college for awhile and wasn't working with children, and then when I had the chance to teach in our children's school again I asked for primary -

because I'm a good preschool teacher, and I wasn't at all sure how to teach primary, and I figured I was old enough to learn something new. This is my second year in primary, and I'm learning a lot and I'm much better at it this year than I was last year. The first year, as Lilian Katz says, is survival.

In my experience, survival is much easier if you have help. At Pacific Oaks we have never divided children into small classes with one or two teachers; we have always opted for larger groups with a teaching team. In primary we have 35 kids with four adults. Our preschool groups usually run from 18 to 26, depending on the capacity of the space, with a team of adults sharing responsibility. I know good schools that operate the other way, but I think it is useful to know that there are options - that there is a choice of ways to organize space and staff.

Now, the most interesting thing I've been learning is about dealing with the energy of children in a large group. Many of you set yourself this task in preschool, but I didn't much. I have doubts about the appropriateness of large-group activities for children under five, and so we were always inclined to have small story groups and informal music and snacks at little tables. But school-age children, I believe, do need the experience of coming together as a whole group. Some of them, inevitably, don't like the idea. They have to sit still, and Jason and Debby are so high-energy that sitting still is really hard for them. They're supposed to listen when someone else is talking, and some six-year-olds have such low voices that it's hard to hear what they're saying and it's boring anyway. Or the

teacher is reminding you of rules you thought were pretty dumb in the first place. And your friend is sitting next to you and if you make faces at her she'll laugh, and that makes you feel good, and it makes the meeting less boring.

In our experience it's nearly always the same children, over and over, who behave this way - the willful ones. They get bawled out regularly by the teacher. That doesn't make them feel good, and so they're likely to act out some more because they're feeling bad. You can get into a real power struggle with them, and while you can win if you're fierce enough, nearly always the group gets disrupted while this is going on. What I've been discovering, gradually, are some new ways of dealing with that negative energy by acknowledging its creative aspects and using my own creativity to improvise on it, acknowledging that child and helping us all to enjoy a new experience.

Last year in our class Kevin and Jason clowned a lot to get attention in meeting. We figured that was inappropriate behavior, and so we told them to be quiet and separated them from their friends and sometimes sent them out of meeting altogether. And then one day I had a sudden inspiration. Kevin, who wasn't very successful in school tasks and didn't feel good about himself, began a new dramatic interruption. Somewhere he had picked up a pun on the Arabic word, salaam, and he began bowing and saying "Salami, salami. Baloney, baloney." And instead of telling him to be quiet as usual, when Jason and some other kids laughed, I suddenly said, "Hey, Kevin's got a new chant. Let's all try it." So we did, and he was surprised and pleased, and

then we went on to the rest of our business.

By the next day I had thought, Let's do something with that! So I drew a circle on the board and put some little spots on it and said, "Know what this is? Salami. What's this?""Baloney." "What else do you like to eat?" "Pancakes." Another circle. "How can you tell pancakes from baloney?" "Add a square of butter." . . . Well, it became our food chant, and we scored it on the board, and the kids pasted cut-outs and made and read their own chants. It was delightful, and it was all inspired by Kevin's creative but unacceptable energy and my sudden realization that I could use my creative energy to do something with it, to give us all a chance to play with it and laugh at it together.

I believe very strongly in emergent curriculum - in building on children's own interests and adding adult ideas and sharing the things we - the people in this group, at this time - care most about. I think such a curriculum is much more appropriate and much more enjoyable than any pre-planned curriculum. And so if Amelia brings her grasshopper or Brandon can't stop talking about whales or the kids start making volcanoes in the sand box, I ask them questions and add my ideas to theirs and encourage other children to join them. All that nice creative energy. But it's harder to build on children's ideas which are initially inappropriate - to turn destructive energy into creative curriculum. Often, of course, you can't. But when you can, delightful things can happen.

You can't do it unless you can play and laugh with the child. You can't do that unless you can give up your fear of losing con-

trol. You have to keep remembering that you are bigger than the kids and, most important, you have a lot more ideas than they do. If you can keep your sense of humor and your creative ideas flowing, then you'll stay relaxed and they'll stay relaxed and it won't turn into a power trip in which they sense your fear and try to see if they can get you.

Even very little children pick up on this process, though they may not be as articulate as my big kids about what is going on. A turning point for me last year was when I had gotten into a physical confrontation with a large nine-year-old. He was supposed to come inside to read with me, and he was being resistant, so I took him by the arm - grabbed him is a more accurate description - and he dug in his heels, and there we were, struggling with each other, and I was getting really angry. because he did this almost every day and it was getting pretty old, when he looked up at me and said, "You're cute when you're mad."

Talk about losing face! I <u>was</u> mad, and I wasn't able to laugh at myself as much then as I did later, when I had cooled down and gotten some perspective on it. It changed my relationship with him for the rest of the year; we became good friends, because laughter leveled our relationship. We still had some confrontations, but both of us could see the humor in them and stay more relaxed. This was important for him, because he didn't read very well, and his resistance reflected his anxiety about his lack of skill. If it wasn't all that serious then he could stumble over the words without losing face with me, and I could help him because we were friends. Laughter helps remind us that

the human condition is pretty foolish after all, but we're all in it together, and so we can help each other and care for each other.

Do you remember the king's Fool? The king was the most important man in the realm; in some kingdoms, he had absolute "Off with his head" power. Now, that's a scary and lonely place to be. It's even scarier than being the teacher in charge of a class. And if the king was an absolute monarch, then no one could tell him that he was wrong - or that he was cute when he was mad. Except the Fool.

Little children play the fool too; they sometimes tell us things about ourselves which no adult would dare. Remember the Emperor's New Clothes? We can take it from children because they don't count, they don't understand, they aren't part of the grown-up scheme of things on which our status and dignity depend. The same thing was true of the Fool. Because he was foolish, what he said didn't count.

Now, in fact the Fool was likely to be a very astute observer of human behavior and to make very wise comments on what was going on - right to the king's face. He had to be funny, to use language in a witty way, to entertain. But there was method in his madness; that's why he was so valuable to the king. He was the only person who could speak the truth in court. And he could do so because he wore motley and jingling bells and cavorted and teased and therefore obviously was not to be taken seriously. Under cover of laughter, truth can be handled, because the king can always choose whether to believe the Fool's words or to laugh them off.

We have the same choice with children. Children will keep us honest if we let them. They will let us know, through their resistance and through their laughter, when things that matter to us don't matter to them. They have other wishes and desires, and they think ours are silly. When children resist us, or laugh at us, I think we need to take a second look at what we're asking. Is it really important? And we need to pay particular attention to our most willful children - to the ones who always give us a hard time. What is the issue? Is it this child's will that needs breaking - or is it our program that needs some changing so that this child can thrive in it?

Those of us who work with children have a tremendous privilege; we can count on them to let us know that things are wrong. They communicate their feelings directly. You can work with adults for years and they won't tell you a thing; they'll just resent you silently. Cherish those children and be grateful for their honesty, even though it makes your life more difficult. My greatest worry about group day care is that it will homogenize our children - make them all more like each other. They'll resist that, if we let them.

But what can you do with all those strong feelings, all that energy? How can you keep it in bounds, so that you and the children can survive together? You orchestrate it. This is something I keep learning for myself, day to day, even though I suppose I've known it in principle for years. You orchestrate it - you manage its ebb and flow. There is a time for every purpose under heaven, remember? A time to cry and a time to laugh - a time to yell and

a time to be quiet. Both are OK; quiet isn't better, it's just different.

I used to work a lot with preschoolers in music, and I learned that if you give a child a drum and she wants to bang it loudly, you don't immediately say, "We hit the drum gently." That's not what drums are for. Instead, you capitalize on your adult awareness of all the possibilities of a drum. You say, "Wow, that's a loud drum. Can you make it louder? Can you make it softer? How soft can you make it? That's a tiny, tiny noise. Can you make a middle-sized noise?" And so on. You're encouraging experimentation, you're enriching the child's spontaneous play, you're adding your ideas to the child's. You're making it clear that there are many, many things you can do with a drum and all of them may be OK depending on the circumstances. (A few aren't OK, if they endanger the drum or other people, and that you're clear about.) You're orchestrating.

When we do group chanting, like Salami, or group singing, it offers a whole range of possibilities, and one of them is to yell as loud as you can. If children start doing this, I find it easier to orchestrate it than to get punitive about it. When I first tried the song, Today Is Monday, as a food song to extend our food chant, several of the kids thought the line, "All you hungry children, Come and eat it up" was silly, and so they shouted "No!" I'll show you. When I get to that line, all of you yell "No!"

Monday, string beans
Tuesday, spaghetti
Wednesday, zoo-oop
Thursday, roast beef
Friday, fresh fish
Saturday, chicken
Sunday, ice cream

You're really loud. How loud can we all yell? You've been quiet for a long time; let's try it! Yell till I give the quiet sign. One, two, three, No!

That's it. That's what I did with the kids. I did some other things too. Our children are beginning readers, so I often use songs to practice reading, putting words and symbols on the chalk board. Here are the pictures I used to introduce variety into No! If you see this one, whisper; if you see this one, speak it firmly; if you see this one, yell. Let's try it.

Another day I decided to elaborate on No, and I wrote all of these: No, Yes, Yum, Wow, and Shh. You have to pay attention to see which word we're going to use. Here we go.

Some of you are laughing. Others, I'm sure, think this is undignified and silly. It's playful; that's the point. What we're creating together - here, a little, and in my class - is a complex, playful, lively learning environment. It isn't boring, because unexpected things keep happening. That's important. Any job becomes routine. Jobs working with children are exhausting; we are asked to give so much, to care so much, to keep things working all the time. We need to find ways to unwind. One way is to join the children in their silliness and to discover our own. Children find humor in the unexpected, the incongruous, the novel. So do we, unless we get stuck in our dignity. Laughter can help us relax and care for each other.

Let's look at our own silliness. Here am I, flown in from California on a large hunk of metal to give a speech to all of you. That's pretty silly. Here are you, taking a perfectly good Friday night to come and sit in a large stuffy room on uncomfortable chairs to listen to me. And I'm not even behaving properly; I'm being foolish, I'm singing and yelling and asking you to join me. You weren't brought up to behave like that. Now, just for fun, suppose an observer suddenly dropped in off the moon, came in through the skylight (pretend there's a skylight), and is sitting up there on the ceiling trying to figure out what we're doing here. She (it's time for a moon <u>woman</u>) can't understand our language, of course. She sees me standing up here and all of you sitting there being uncomfortable and she thinks, That's silly. She's right.

Moon people, of course, don't look anything like us. Put yourself in the moon woman's place for a moment, and turn and look at the silly person next to you. The moon woman doesn't have ears or eyebrows or a chin; she's never seen those things before. Be the moon woman. Look steadily at some foolish part of your neighbor's face or head: her nose, or chin, or eyebrow, or ear. Stare. Try to see it freshly, like a moon woman - or a child. Does it move you to wonder, or pity, or laughter? Are faces beautiful, or ridiculous? Express your feelings out loud. Reach out your hand to your neighbor. If you're very brave, tickle her. If you're not that brave, pat her on the head. Smile at her. Laugh at her, if she's funny - or if you are.

Now our behavior has become more comprehensible to the moon woman and the child. We're paying attention to each other. This room is full of creatures worth paying attention to. Paying attention to each other is more sensible than sitting still and keeping our hands to ourselves. It's playful, it's exploratory, it adds to our knowledge of the world. The only way for a teacher to stay alive is to keep learning. Children learn through play. So do grownups. How can you keep playing and alive?

Children need to play. Their world is full of the unexpected, and they can best handle that if they don't have to do things right. They need to experiment, to ask questions and take risks. So do we, as teachers or parents; if we can't make mistakes, we're dead. We need to capitalize on our goofs and failures and inadvertent foolishness. We have a rule in our class about being rude to people, and one day my co-teacher, in exasperation, yelled "Shut up!" at a child. He looked at her in surprise: "You can't say that." "You're right," she said, "I can't." We all break rules; we all make mistakes. That's useful for all of us, big and little, to remember.

The dean of faculty at Pacific Oaks is named Karen Fite, and every time we publish a college bulletin she writes a Dean's Message. Here is part of one of them:

> I have a jar of soap bubble mixture in my car, and on fine days while I'm waiting for a traffic light I blow soap bubbles out the window. Some times I bring it to work and blow a few soap bubbles into each office. On rainy days I wear weird hats to work, and some day, when I feel the need, I'm going to wear my Morris the Cat t-shirt which I got free for 20 labels from cat food cans. So what?
>
> There is a need for a clown - I'd say for a Fool - in any group or institution. I'd like to be able to say that

I have observed that any institution which takes itself too seriously is not long for this world, but I'm sure you can name as many deadly serious institutions as I can which have been around for some time now and which show every sign of persisting into the future. Quietly, inside myself, I keep alive the hope that if enough people in enough institutions can take the risk of caring for their Fools and letting them loose occasionally, maybe some day there will be a world in which Fools are free.

I'm not quite crazy enough and not quite free enough to really let my whole Fool loose. We all need to share the burden of being the Fool around here. Sometimes I forget the joy of buying 20 helium ballons and turning them all free; sometimes I forget to look for rainbows or can't see the souls of rocks. If I worked with children every day, they'd help me remember. But since I don't, if you see me wearing my Morris the Cat t-shirt, you'll know I need some help nurturing the fool at Pacific Oaks, so blow me a soap bubble, hand me a helium balloon, come upstairs and yell "Everyone out for volleyball!" And, if you think of it, come in and tell me if there's a rainbow.

We don't have room here for volleyball, so we'll have to try an alternative. If a group is wiggly, movement is needed. Our brains need body activity to stay alert, just as children's do. Some of you look wiggly. Remember The Grand Old Duke of York?

Did this work for you? Do you feel refreshed? Was it fun? Funny? Did you hate it? It's perfectly OK if you didn't do it or if you did it differently. Play is exploration - messing about with the possibilities. There is no right way.

In 1972, I think it was, Margaret Mead spoke at NAEYC, and one of the things she said was this:

I think the most dangerous thing that is happening to children in this country is boredom. This is more dangerous than any of the other things that are happening (and there are plenty of other dangerous things). But the transcendent boredom - to be shut up in a room, away from anything that moves or breathes or grows, in a controlled temperature, hour after hour - means that we are taking away from them any chance of responsiveness. (Young Children, August 1973)

She was talking mostly about older children in schools. But more and more of our children are now in group programs, hour after hour, younger and younger. And at home more and more are experiencing vicarious emotions, strong feelings projected on the TV screen, rather than coming to terms with their own. I fear indeed that we are taking away from them any chance of responsiveness. Those of us responsible for young children, especially in group care, are in my view obligated above all to make sure that their lives with us are not boring. This does not mean that we should exert ourselves to keep them entertained - quite the opposite. It means that we need to provide environments which are real - which contain real animals, real weather, real people and their tears and laughter, real risks and successes and failures. Real, alive people say "I want" a lot. They aren't nice all the time. They care passionately about their block buildings, their friends, their enemies, their turns. They haven't grown up and learned not to care about anything very much, to compromise and give in and be polite.

These are necessary skills for adults. But I worry if we are socializing young children too soon. I like willful children, because their wills aren't broken; they care a lot about things. The only way to live with a willful child is to keep your sense of humor and help him develop his. Willful people who lack the perspective which laughter provides are both insufferable and dangerous. Laughter requires looking at oneself from the outside, in all one's pomp and ridiculousness. Children are our fools; they help us see ourselves with fresh eyes. We can do the same

for them - not by teasing them in ways which put them down, but by sharing our laughter, by asking questions, by being undignified with them, by teaching them to turn destructive to creative energy.

And a Time to Laugh is the title of a master's thesis written at Pacific Oaks by Nancy Piscitelli, who works with handicapped infants. Becoming a parent is, for most of us, a joyous experience. But parents who discover that their baby is handicapped often mourn instead; they lose their joy in their child. Nancy says that her goal in working with these children is to help them experience the zest of achievement, the joy of social response - and to help their parents rediscover joy in them. She quotes Martin Grotjahn's book, Beyond Laughter:

> Everything done with laughter helps us be human. Laughter is the communication which is essentially and exclusively human. What is learned with laughter is learned well.

As a consultant to other programs, Nancy says she judges them by how many smiles she sees in the room. She looks for loving voices and smiles and physical contact, for social games played with the babies. Children who fail to develop their capacity for smiling and laughter fail to develop social attachment. Modern society suffers from the presence of such unattached people - people who experience "no joy, no grief, no guilt and no remorse. They are singularly humorless." (Lorenz, On Aggression) Feeling nothing, they look for powerful psychic jolts in drugs and violence. We need to cultivate children's feelings - their own real feelings, both rage and joy, and help them learn to accept and live with their feelings in non-destructive ways.

To permit expression of strong feelings, you must be able to laugh. And you must be able to touch - to hold, to hug, to restrain, to communicate physically as well as verbally. Many centers for young children are hard environments. We need more softness, more laps, more touching. Little children are vulnerable; sometimes they can't use their words. They need contact. So do we.

I've tried to do some unexpected things with you this evening - to play the fool, to make laughter and playfulness possible. As we end this time together, I'd like to ask you to do three things.

First, stand up - and wiggle in some soothing way.

Second, touch, in a friendly but unexpected way, each of the people you can reach from where you're standing.

Third (this is your homework), some time during the day tomorrow, when other people are present, do something unexpected. Play the fool. And see what happens.